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ABSTRACT

Recognition of the enrollment crisis facing foreign language teachers in colleges and universities prompts the author to propose alternatives to the lock-step curriculum still characteristic of many language programs. Individualized instruction is seen as the key to the improvement of student motivation; extra-curricular language activities and trips abroad are also mentioned as possibilities to help stimulate interest in second language learning. (RL)

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FOREIGN LANGUAGES: THE FUTURE IS CONDITIONAL

Observers of the situation in education in general and foreign languages in particular currently speak of a crisis. The decrease in governmental funding, at the national, state and local level, together with the drop in enrolments, especially in colleges and universities, has brought about varied reaction among teachers of foreign languages. There are despairing prophets of doom who wring their hands and yearn wistfully for the return of the "good old days," which we have just recently passed through. There are those who feel we must strike back, quick and hard, revolutionizing our methodology and changing our emphasis to fit the tenor of the current moment. We hear endless talk about a shift toward "more relevance," we see teachers and administrators enter into contracts with students over grades, agree to lower goals and standards, and practically stand on their heads to maintain interest and enrolments in foreign language courses and programs. It is apparent that in some instances we have become paranoid; we're actually running scared. We feel we're under fire and must justify again, for the Nth time, the desirability or the need to study languages.

At the time of the Fischer-Spassky championship match, my fourteen-year-old son decided to take up chess. In no time at all he became a fanatic, a real chess-nut. He followed the newspaper and T. V. accounts of Fischer-Spassky closely. He got hold of a chess set and numerous books on the subject and began to enrich his vocabulary with

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such terminology as "the Ruy López offense," "the Alekhine defense," "the queen's pawn gambit," and many other equally esoteric expressions. After he had developed a good knowledge of the game, he began to cast about for a victim, and the most handy choice, unfortunately, was me. I had to learn the rudiments of chess in order to serve as his sacrificial lamb.

In our games, he would come swooping down on me with his queen, knights and bishops breathing fire and have me flustered and mated in a matter of a dozen or so moves. My poor king never seemed able to escape his attacks. Out of sheer frustration, I picked up one of my son's books and learned that one of the greatest weaknesses of a beginning chess player is the tendency to panic when he finds his king under attack, especially early in the game. The book reassuringly points out that there is no need for this. For if the king is simply castled and properly placed behind the three pawns on their original squares, it becomes very difficult to mate him. The book goes on to indicate that the danger of such early threats to the king is usually more apparent than real. If the defending player will just take his time and figure out his strategy very carefully, he will usually see that his king is a lot safer than he first imagined, and with a few, well-chosen moves, he can easily ward off the threat and, lo and behold, in so doing, will probably even have regained the initiative. This was a valuable lesson for me, one that I have tried to put into practice, at least while playing chess. And while I won't say that my son doesn't still beat me with frustrating regularity, at least the

matches we now have are respectably closer and considerably more hard fought and drawn out. Indeed, on rare occasion, I may even win one.

The point of this digression is most certainly not to get any of you to take up the game of chess. In fact, if you value your nerves and ego, I strongly advise against it. Rather, I would like to draw what must by now be an obvious analogy between the king under early attack and the current situation in foreign languages. Clearly, the very worst thing we can do now is to throw our hands up in despair. The best thing we can do is to look carefully and rationally at our situation and, without being precipitous, see just where we are and what reasonable moves we must make to solidify our present position and, perhaps, turn the tide once again in our favor.

Let's retreat just a bit and reminisce about the "good old days" of a short while back. Fifteen years or so ago, foreign languages were enjoying favor. In fact, when Sputnik was launched, they even entered a golden age, in the literal as well as the figurative sense. Money was readily available from governmental as well as other sources, for all sorts of experimentation, at levels ranging from FLES right on up to the graduate college. New methodology was being tried, language laboratories were being installed and equipment was being purchased with reckless abandon. Schools were vying with each other in the establisment of FLES programs; enrolments burgeoned at the high school and college levels. Some graduate school language departments grew to mammoth proportions and began grinding out M. A.'s and Ph. D.'s

in languages at a rate faster than one could keep up with. Positions for grade school and high school language teachers were so numerous that one could usually have one's pick of jobs. Money and equipment were so readily available that administrators themselves would sometimes take the initiative to see that they had language facilities comparable to other schools. College and university professors received lucrative grants to set up new programs in language or literature, or simply to go off to foreign libraries and do research on almost any specialized subject that was even remotely related to the actual teaching of foreign languages. Foreign study programs sprung up like mushrooms and hordes of American students and teachers went abroad for study or travel.

Then, a few years ago, the whole building began to shake and, at the college and university levels at least, it seemed as if the walls were crumbling. Today it appears that, in some instances, the roof is about to fall in, and we are all asking ourselves at least two basic questions: Where did we fail? Where do we go from here?

With regard to the first question--where did we fail?--there are many and diverse explanations, depending largely on whom one talks to. Some will attribute our present decline to the unjustified haste with which we abandoned traditional methods of language teaching in favor of untried novelty. Some speak of compartmentalization and impersonality, blaming the structuralists for breaking language learning down into minute components and removing from it its human and cultural values in favor of cold analysis and ad nauseam repetition of patterns. In the

colleges and universities, many decry in retrospect the strong emphasis on training students in literature, and the premium placed on ivory-tower professors who engaged primarily in scholarship, in the form of books and articles on literary criticism, or on more esoteric linguistic problems. These same people see this ill as eventually working its way back down to the high schools and grade schools, where the new teachers prepared by the various colleges and graduate schools were poorly equipped to deal with the practical problems of elementary and secondary school foreign language teaching, and language-oriented extra-curricular activities. The huge enrolments and readily-available monies brought on the necessity or desirability to seek mechanical means to handle some aspects of language teaching, and the tape recorders, teaching machines, film strips, movies and overhead projectors that came as a blessing for the happy few who really knew how to use them, merely made classroom copouts of the teachers who misused or abused them.

The various personal theories on where we supposedly went wrong in our teaching methods are endless, and it would serve no useful purpose in this talk to decry any of them or defend any of the others. Moreover, I'm not entirely convinced that specific differences in methodology is our biggest problem, if it is indeed a problem. But the fact of the matter is that, as a profession, we are no longer on the crest of a hill enjoying the view around us, but rather, down near the bottom of the ravine, looking nostalgically and wistfully upward. As a matter of fact, reviewing the past is little consolation and even hurts a bit, for the general feeling is that we had the ball to run with and, in spite of all our efforts, we somehow dropped it.

But then again maybe the phrase "despite all our efforts" is not quite accurate. Maybe that was our trouble. Perhaps the situation was too good for too long, and we were not so much reckless as we were complacent. After all, colleges and universities protected us with substantial language requirements, and strong encouragement was given students in grade school, and especially high school, to take foreign languages in preparation for college. Our classrooms were filled. Our cups were running over. By sheer inertia students accepted, en masse and without question, a credo that we didn't even have to take the trouble to instill in them, to the effect that the study of languages is important.

Then came the period of our deep national involvement in Viet Nam. All across the country people, young people, especially students, began to question our values at all levels. The cry for "relevance" went up and the issue of priorities was raised. In the colleges and universities particularly it was asked: "is it really that important to spend two whole years studying a language when this time might be spent on sociology, ecology, or simply the hard matter of developing a specialty or skill with which to earn a living?" Students began to resent being sentenced to put in two years of their valuable time in language courses which were, as they put it, "monotonous, boring, and irrelevant," when they could have used this time more profitably being better lawyers, social workers, business men, or what have you in this highly competitive world of ours.

The same question began to be raised in the high schools, since an increasingly larger percentage of the students began to look toward a job or trade after graduation, rather than think in terms of college. And, at the grade school level, parent organizations became more and more concerned that their children have sound courses in the basic skills, a sound athletic program, and good training in practical arts before they indulge in such an impractical luxury as foreign languages.

Under the demands and pressures of students and parents, language enrolments, especially in the colleges and universities, began to fall drastically. In many institutions of higher learning the language requirement went right out the window and in many others it continues to be threatened with extinction. Naturally, this de-emphasis on languages in colleges reached down to again affect the high schools, many of which no longer see the need to insist on languages if colleges are not requiring them.

This sudden reversal of the language trend struck fear and panic among language educators, much as the descent of my son's queen, bishops, knights and rooks upon my poor, defenseless king used to strike fear into me. Language teachers began to grab quickly for any means of self-defense, for, after all, this could well mean the survival of the profession. Special degrees, such as the Bachelor of General Studies, were set up to allow vocal, recalcitrant students to quietly circumvent the language requirement. The pass-fail system provided another sweetening of the bitter pill of being sentenced to X number of semesters of foreign languages. Contracts with a guaranteed "no flunk" clause were

entered into by student and professor, while courses given in English about the culture of a foreign country are now accepted as language courses in some institutions. Following the student demands for courses that are "relevant," we have sought to alter our content away from a civilization or literary emphasis and focused more on cross-disciplinary and practical aspects, coming up with such things as "Commercial French," "Spanish for Health Professionals" and so on. Some departments are now alerting themselves to the possibilities offered by ghetto and barrio situations, and are moving into the realm of bilingual education and cross-cultural courses. Some of these efforts at innovation and relevance are highly laudable--the disturbing thing is that our motives seem not to be. For many of us are frankly running so scared that we appear to be grasping at straws to forestall or prevent what we feel to be our inevitable demise.

Those of us familiar with the job situation can sympathise with this concern. We see our language students emerging with B. A.'s, M. A.'s and Ph. D.'s only to find when they are ready to work that there is often no job, at any level of employment as teachers, nor in commercial concerns, as these often prefer to hire foreign nationals. But despite relatively hard times, we can be confident, I think, that we will weather this storm and come out all the stronger for it. Indeed, some of the people in our profession already have done so.

Recently, two colleagues and I visited a university where the language requirement had been dropped, and simply made one of several

electives in a communications core area. The first year that languages were no longer required, enrolments at that university fell off substantially. It almost appeared as if the bottom were falling out. Then something most interesting happened. After the initial traumatic reaction, language enrolments at that school began a steady climb. As a matter of fact, within a very few years they were not only back to what they had been before the requirement was lifted, they were even higher.

Before anyone settles too comfortably into the belief that this is bound to happen, and that all we have to do is sit tight and wait for the storm to spend itself and blow over, I hasten to point out that the language departments at the particular university that I refer to most emphatically did not do that. On the contrary, they recognized at once that something had to be done. Under the vigorous leadership of some of their more capable and dedicated people, they sat down and mapped out a careful strategy to meet the problem head on. They enlisted the support of some of their upper division language majors and set up a program wherein the elementary language students were to attend classes twice a day, five days a week, with the idea of being required little or no homework or outside preparation. In the first of the two daily meetings they met in groups of about twenty or so, and this session was followed by a second meeting later on in smaller groups of six to eight students. In these larger groups the teacher was usually assisted by one or more upper division students who roamed about the class giving assistance to students, helping them to

understand the structures and involving them in conversations in small groups. During the second meeting, the groups were already smaller, and the teacher and his assistant could even pair off students and involve several pairs in separate conversations on a one-to-one basis. In every case, classes were very informal and a definite effort was made to involve the students in actually using the target language.

When my colleagues and I visited a number of these classes, we were amazed to hear the air literally filled with the sounds of the target language. We saw interested and enthusiastic students being coached by dedicated and inspiring teachers who obviously had allowed their own dedication and enthusiasm for their discipline to become highly contagious and rub off on the students. We saw such things as overlays and overhead projectors being used with clever innovation and effectiveness and we were told that videotape, especially in the presentation of grammar and structure, was also being used with very satisfying and even surprising results. Most important, we learned that the teachers involved in these courses worked like hell. They designed their own materials and courses, met frequently to rehash what they were doing and constantly tried to plan ahead. We also learned that students were invited frequently, to provide feedback and make suggestions on anything from class content to the frequency and makeup of exams. In short, there had been created at that school an atmosphere of enthusiasm, hard work, and cooperation the like of which we had not been accustomed to seeing. Even when walking on campus we noticed the unusually warm and friendly air of the language students

toward their instructors, who were greeted everywhere with cheerful words and amenities, always in the target language.

In pointing out this example, I do not mean to suggest that what happened at that particular institution is applicable in the same way everywhere. I do not mean to suggest specifically that everyone shoud immediately shift to a spoken emphasis in languages, meet each class ten hours per week and hold frequent coffee klatches for students and faculty to get to know each other. What I do mean to suggest is that all of us, at whatever level we teach, take a good hard look at our particular program. If nothing else, the current language crisis can have the effect of jarring us out of what may have been a complacency and routine attitude toward our teaching, and cause us to see what others, particularly those who are having enviable success, are doing.

One particular item on which I think most of us can agree is that the time is past when we can give no more than lip service to the problem of individual differences among students. It is incumbent on us now to devise truly viable means to allow individuals to pursue their own interests and progress at their own speed in language learning, rather than be completely locked into a program. Another area where we may have fallen down in recent years, at least at the university level, is that of informal and extra-curricular language activities. The strong emphasis on publication and the scorn with which the beginning and intermediate language areas have been looked upon by professors with ivory-tower pretensions has given the impression that this sort of activity is

a waste of time and beneath the professional dignity of the serious scholar or language teacher. This attitude can no longer prevail. We all know that it is often here, in these informal situations, that the real linguistic and cultural interests of many students are truly developed.

I think all of us can agree that an important contribution we can make is to interest as many students as possible in the idea of including a foreign experience in their school careers, in the form of either travel or study abroad. This is an appealing goal that students can strive for. Moreover, it provides them with concrete proof that the language and cultural training we give them does lead somewhere, and gives them a real reason and incentive to pursue their language training seriously and enthusiastically. For our part as teachers, we should make every effort, even more so than in the past, to provide our students with as much help, information, and encouragement as we can toward achieving this goal of a real foreign experience.

With language enrolments down, the battle to continue to attract students must obviously be fought and won within the framework of the students we already have. Still, amid the concern for "relevance," language requirements, or shrinking enrolments, we must never get so caught up in the numbers game that we lose sight of our purpose as language teachers, which is to promote as deeply as possible an interest in, and sympathetic understanding of, a language and culture different from our own. This is the attitude we seek to awaken in our students, whether they are to become teachers, bankers, housewives,

or lawyers. This is a broad and humanistic goal, one that transcends enrolment figures, numbers of majors, or sizes of classes, and puts such considerations in their proper perspective. After all, even if we must deal for a time with smaller numbers, we still believe that our work is of sufficiently high calling to demand nothing less than our constant, most dedicated efforts.

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